

Public Health History - Vaccinations

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Public health works behind the scenes everyday to make your life and your community healthier. Through food inspections, immunizations, education, animal control, air quality and a number of other programs, your local public health department works diligently to prevent and control the spread of disease.

In honor of National Public Health Week, coming April 2 – 8, we review the history of public health and the impact it has had on our nation.

One of the major impacts of public health has been a decrease in illnesses due to an aggressive immunization program. Since the vaccination process was developed Dr. Edward Jenner in 1796, vaccinations have prevented immeasurable numbers of illness and death.

More than 200 years ago Dr. Jenner discovered that milkmaids who were infected with cowpox did not get smallpox. He took an 8-year-old boy, intentionally infected him with cowpox, and then exposed him to smallpox to test his theory. The boy did not get ill with smallpox. Dr. Jenner called his success a “vaccination” after the Latin word for cow – *vacca*.

Dr. Jenner’s vaccination process was imitated by others, and today vaccines protect us from more than 20 diseases, including measles, mumps, rubella, influenza, rabies, typhoid, polio and plague. Diseases that were once common are now rarely seen, thanks to vaccinations.

Vaccines encourage our bodies to develop antibodies and memory cells against certain illnesses. Then, when the disease tries to attack us, the antibodies and memory cells fight it off.

Vaccination is an important part of public health. It not only protects the person who receives the vaccination, it also protects everyone that person comes in contact with. An unvaccinated person who gets sick with influenza or measles may pass the illness along to other people, who may pass it along to yet others, and so forth.

The viruses and germs that cause disease will likely always be present in our environment and will always be a risk to our health. But with your local public health department’s aggressive vaccination program, cooperative parents with a desire to protect their children, and scientists around the world continually working to develop new vaccines – our community will continue to be protected from vaccine-preventable illnesses.

For more information on vaccinations, contact the Springfield-Greene County Health Department’s Westside Public Health Center at (417) 874-1220.